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## INUIT HANDS

Samples of Arctic Survival

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McCORD MUSEUM

## INUIT HANDS

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## INUIT HANDS

### Samples of Arctic Survival

#### The Collection

McCord Museum, McGill University in Montreal, presents only a small sample of its large and important collection of Inuit artifacts. The curator has attempted to present only one side of Inuit life -- that of the technology of survival. However, the artistic and mythological expression of the Inuit is evident in the most simple of objects. Due to age, fragility, or uniqueness, not all aspects of Inuit material life are portrayed. Some artifacts do not travel well... Time and exhibit space also controlled the selection.

The oldest collection of arctic artifacts at the McCord was begun prior to 1850 when the Montreal Natural History Society was founded. The collection was then given to David Ross McCord, Q.C. (1844-1930), founder of the McCord Museum in 1921. Collecting objects, or "curios," was considered an acceptable leisure activity of the 19th century. The phenomenon of collecting exotic curiosities from other cultures is an old and established part of Western European culture and intellectual history. The Canadian collectors in this early period were explorers; members of the scientific community, i.e. government geographical surveyors and geologists; the North West Mounted Police, whalers; traders; and church missionaries. Many of the artifacts collected were found on the surface at abandoned camp sites or graves; some were obtained by barter and others were made especially for the buyer. Others have no provenance at all -- some had only a name of the collector. These northern souvenirs were treasured; and brought back to southern Canada to be displayed as private collections within the home or to be studied at institutions of learning such as McGill University.

In the late 19th century, as arctic travel increased with better modes of transportation, more goods of European manufacture reached the Inuit. Whalers and fur traders introduced steel and iron tools, stroud cloth, cotton, glass beads, steel needles, tobacco, such foods as flour and tea, fire arms, and ammunition. The introduction of European goods and culture changed and enriched Inuit technology. New methods were used to make tools, and decorate clothing, and a new art form was created.

Europeans were somewhat slow to realize the value of the old culture and its adaptation to survival. After several ill-fated expeditions, many adopted the Inuit use of skin clothing, modes of transportation, and survival skills.

In general, the earlier acquisitions are of a more representational nature: artifacts and clothing to sustain life, but also created and carved to adorn and protect the wearer. Collections acquired after 1940 are of a more aesthetic nature, such as stone and bone sculpture, prints, and crafts.

#### Inuit or Eskimo?

The word Eskimo may have derived from the Algonkian word meaning "eaters of raw meat."

It is generally accepted that Canadian Eskimos now refer to themselves as



Inuit. The word is derived from INUK which means "man." Only infrequently are Eskimos of the Canadian Arctic called Eskimos -- they are INUIT.

The word Eskimo still appears in the literature of the arctic when referring to the ancestors of the present day Inuit. It is found in the early writings and histories, or in the use of a term such as PALEO-ESKIMO -- the earliest arctic cultures. Both terms, as applied in the text, refer to the same people.

### Canadian Arctic History

The ancestors of the Inuit have occupied the arctic regions for approximately 4,000 years. This vast area reaches from Alaska eastward to Greenland, and southward to Hudson Bay and the coasts of Northern Quebec and Labrador. The earliest people, 'Paleo-Eskimo,' crossed over to Alaska from Eastern Siberia on a land bridge that has since sunk beneath the waters of the Bering Sea. The history of those early Eskimo is fragmentary and scanty. In general, we can assume that there were several waves of immigrants into Canada from northwestern Alaska. The Eskimo were the last of the aboriginal people to come to America. Changes in climate and availability of the food supply fluctuated over the centuries and affected settlement patterns and the methods used to exploit the wildlife resources. The early settlers lived in small kin-related bands and were nomadic. They utilized numerous and different means of survival, but all lived in subsistence economies based on hunting and fishing.

The following is a brief description of the ancestral Inuit. Dates given are approximate.

#### 1. Paleo-Eskimo:

Arctic Small Tool Tradition, Pre-Dorset.

2000BC - 800BC -- Makers of tiny, precise tools of chipped stone. Originated in Siberia or Alaska. Remains of houses originally built of sod or snow, having a central passage with a hearth-like box made of stone slabs. No evidence of boats or dog sleds. The Pre-Dorset people have left evidence of the toggle-head harpoon, the remains of a few bone and antler tools, and small soapstone lamps.

#### 2. Dorset:

800BC - 1300AD -- Named after Cape Dorset on Baffin Island. Extended from the western part of Central Arctic to eastern Greenland, northwestern part of Newfoundland, eastern Hudson Bay, and northern Quebec. Developed within Canada from the Pre-Dorset culture. They introduced blades of ground and polished stone, oil burning stone lamps, heavy spears and harpoons for the larger animals, and probably the snowhouse. Art was an outstanding feature of Dorset culture. Small and delicate carvings of wood and ivory depicted human and animal forms, while incised objects showed a specific form of cross-hatching. It has been suggested that these art objects served a magico-religious function associated with shamanism.

Between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries, the Dorset culture had all but disappeared. We can speculate that they were either eliminated or assimilated by the Thule from Alaska. The Inuit can recall myths and legends of the Thule invasion of the traditional Dorset hunting grounds.



### 3. Thule:

900AD - 1750AD -- A culture of whale hunters migrated out of north-western Alaska across the top of Arctic Canada. In the warming climatic conditions of the period, they spread rapidly eastward using the UMIAK and sleds pulled by dog teams. They crossed the polar regions to Greenland and southward into Dorset Territory. Thule people had a more effective cultural adaptation to the Arctic: travel by boat and dog team; superior technology for hunting larger animals; fashioning of domestic tools, i.e. stone lamps and pots, the ulu, needle cases; and a distinctive art style--engraved ivory pieces having simple geometric patterns and the 'circle-and-dot' motif or drilled rows of decorative dots.

The demise of Thule culture may be attributed to a climatic change that brought about a gradual cooling period. The supply of large sea mammals was affected and, with the scarcity of the food supply, the Thule abandoned the permanent winter homes to follow a more nomadic way of life. The adaptation to a more seasonal and diverse economy was gradual. The first Europeans to the Arctic were able to observe and record the final transition period from Thule to Inuit.

### 4. Inuit:

1750AD -- Descendants, both culturally and linguistically from the old Thule culture. They had no permanent winter dwellings. Material culture showed a marked simplification of technology and a decrease in the ornamentation of artifacts. The winters were spent in snowhouses on coastal ice, hunting seal and walrus. In summer, forays were made inland to hunt caribou for meat and skins, or to fish in rivers and lakes.

Canada has nine major groups of Inuit:

MACKENZIE	COPPER	IGLOOLIK
POLAR	BAFFIN ISLAND	NETSILIK
SALLIQ (now extinct)	CARIBOU	HUDSON BAY
LABRADOK		

What is truly remarkable is that all arctic groups speak a similar dialect of the same language and share a common culture reinforced by similarities of technology and mythology.

### Transportation

The Inuit used both land and sea for travel. Coastal waters were more than likely used as major migration routes. Archeological sites have provided us with enough knowledge to assume that the Thule people achieved a practical and unique manner to transport themselves and their worldly possessions across the top of Arctic Canada. Thule hunters may have utilized the UMIAK (large boat) to pursue migrating whales.

The UMIAK was a large open boat, constructed from a wooden frame covered with the dehaired skins of walrus. It was propelled by oars, and a small sail made of woven grasses or thin pliable skins. Hunters used the UMIAK as a



hunting boat and for exploratory journeys. The family and household goods were also transported in the UMIAK during seasonal migrations to hunting camps, or for visiting relatives and friends in other areas.

Hunters of the smaller sea mammals used a KAYAK, a form of canoe with a wooden frame covered in sealskin. The lightweight boat had a covered deck and a hole or 'cockpit' for the paddler. On inland waters, hunters speared the caribou from the KAYAKS as they crossed the rivers on their annual migration routes. A hunter carried his weapons or fishing gear strapped to the deck of his KAYAK.

A KOMATIK, or sled, was made of wood and looked rather like a horizontal ladder. The 'shoe' runners were often made of ivory or bone. It was used on land and sea ice to haul goods and game. The older, smaller sleds of the Dorset culture were pulled by hand. The Thule people used a team of dogs in harnesses to pull their sleds. The number of dogs in a team depended upon the ability of the hunter to provide enough food for them -- the usual number was three to five dogs for a family.

The dogs also aided the hunter to track polar bears, to search for the breathing holes of seals, and to carry small saddle bags when the Inuit travelled inland in the summer.

### Housing

The people of the Arctic Small Tool Tradition, the Dorset, and the Thule, were early ancestors of the Inuit. They lived in a variety of housing that depended upon materials available in the region, and the seasonal and migrational patterns of the game they hunted.

The only permanent houses were small, oval or rectangular 'huts', partly sunk into the ground. The walls were constructed of sod, slabs of rock, large whale bones or, when available, wood. The roofs were covered with skins. The Dorset may have been the first people to build a snowhouse or IGLU and passed on their knowledge to the Thule. The snowhouse does not appear to have been constructed in Alaska. Some Inuit utilized the old foundations of stone and bone left by their Thule forebearers, reinforcing the walls with materials at hand and adding a new roof of skins.

The snowhouse was built as a winter dwelling and also as a temporary shelter while on a hunt or journey. The large domed house was approximately 12-15 feet in diameter with smaller rooms added for storage. The entrance to the house was a tunnel-like passage built below the level of the ground floor. The passage acted as a ventilation system and housed the dogs in severe weather. A small window was cut into the domed roof and filled with a block of fresh water ice or a thin piece of gutskin. There was a small ventilation hole in the roof. One or more benches were built of snow near the entrance. They were used either to support the stone lamp and drying rack or as a work area. At the rear, a large platform of snow was constructed for a sleeping area.

In winter villages, where several families had a permanent settlement, a large community snowhouse was raised. Here the people would gather for feasting and celebrations of drumming, song, and dance. The long winter nights were a time for storytelling, seances with the shaman, and games of skill and chance.

During the summer months, the Inuit raised tents of skins. The framework was made of driftwood or bones. The shorter pieces of wood or bone were lashed together to form a tent pole of the required length.



## Clothing

The traditional Inuit depended upon both land and sea animals for their clothing. Tailored clothing of caribou or seal made life possible in the harsh climate.

In winter, a double set of caribou clothing was worn outdoors: one with the fur to the inside, and the outer suit with the fur turned outwards. In summer, where available, the skins of seal were preferred as they were lighter and withstood damp weather. Whatever the material, the construction of the garment allowed the wearer to remain warm and dry.

The skins of other small animals, such as rabbit, fox, and wolverine were used to trim hoods and cuffs. Bird skins (loon and eider duck) and fish skins were used to construct coats, pouches, and hats. However, none had the insulating ability and hard-wearing properties of caribou skin.

Gutskin raingear was made from the intestines of walrus or large seals. Waterproof clothing for the kayaker was invaluable in keeping him dry from the sea-spray and wet weather.

The adult clothing consisted of a coat, usually with a 'tail' at the back, and a pair of short trousers. Mitts with short cuffs, boots of several styles, and warm stockings completed the outfit. Hats were rarely worn, except for special occasions, as the large hood pulled close to the face kept the head snug from harsh winds.

The basic construction remained the same across the Arctic, but regional styles evolved. The back of the coat ends in a tail or flap, and could be long or short. Some had slits at the hip, or center front, to facilitate sitting and pulling the garment on and off the shoulders. The woman's coat often had an extension in the front, rather like an apron. The bottom edges of the coats were sometimes trimmed with a band of fur, a fringe of skin, or small ivory pendants. Traditionally, the Inuit did not have pockets sewn into the garments. Small objects were either hung around the neck on a thong, carried in a small pouch, or suspended from the belt. A woman's coat had a distinctive feature -- that of having a large pouch, or AMAUT, as part of the shoulder area beneath the hood. This AMAUT enabled a mother to carry her baby or small child next to her body for warmth, comfort, and ease of breast-feeding. The AMAUT was lined with a diaper of moss or soft, dried plant fibre. Children wore a one piece suit and, in winter, babies would have a small, soft-skin coat and cap.

We know from evidence found in archeological sites and early descriptive literature that the Inuit wore a form of tailored clothing similar to that of their Dorset and Thule ancestors. The women and young girls were responsible for the making of skin clothing and boots. The garments were pieced together with a fashionable flare -- contrasting strips of light and dark fur or elaborate panels of beadwork sewn on skin or trade cloth. The parts of the animal used in construction often corresponded with that of the human body -- the hood was made from the caribou head with the eye holes stitched closed but the ears remaining. Another example was the making of boots from the tough leg bone area of caribou. The clothing reflected and strengthened the bond between the human and the animals.



## Personal Adornment

For body decoration, tattooing of the face and other body parts was practiced throughout the arctic regions. The designs had a social significance and varied among the cultural groups.

In the Western Arctic, small plugs of ivory or stone, called labrets, were worn as decorations. They fitted through a hole pierced through the cheek or lower lip. Amulets were worn to bring good luck and a healthy life. They were hung or stitched on the back of garments, on a thong around the neck, or strung from a belt. Amulets took various forms: small carvings or models of humans or animals, the beaks and feet of birds, the paws of mammals and small bones. The significance of these charms is now lost with the passage of time and change of cultural values. The power of protection was the property of the owner, but could be inherited by the next of kin.

The female clothing of some Inuit groups, i.e. Caribou and Igloodik, are richly decorated with trade beads in patterns that reflect their Asian roots and those of the European whalers and traders. Other Eastern groups replaced the traditional and natural found objects (teeth, claws, and small bones) with metal spoons, lead drops, and coins.

Hair ornaments of ivory plaques strung with beads were worn by the now extinct group the Salliq of Southampton Island, N.W.T. The women of the Netsilik wrapped their long hair around wooden sticks and then bound it in place with contrasting bands of coloured fur or strips of beadwork.

Earrings were worn in the Western Arctic by both men and women. Traditionally these were made of ivory, copper, soft stone or shells, but after the arrival of traders, coloured beads were used to create beautiful pieces of jewelry.

## Technology: Resources

The technology of the Inuit is unique in the history of tool-making people, and the various means of procuring large mammals on both land and sea are unmatched among other aboriginal hunters. Their highly adaptive means of surviving in the treeless 'tundra' regions is reflected in the objects they created from their restrictive environment. The many geographical regions where Inuit settled were not all similar. The most desolate regions were in the far north, while those who chose a maritime-oriented area further south were able to produce a richer culture. Some groups such as the Caribou of the Central Arctic chose to live almost exclusively in the interior, relying on herds of migrating caribou and fish found in lakes and rivers. What is important is that the arctic (tundra) was practically devoid of vegetation and consequently a heavy reliance was placed on animals (caribou, sea mammals, musk ox, polar bear, and small mammals.)

In the subarctic (taiga) regions of the interior were to be found small trees, shrubs, and a variety of alpine plants and mosses. Here a variety of northern mammals flourished, including vast herds of caribou and other mammals. In the summer, lakes and rivers provided an abundance of northern fish. In most regions, the Inuit altered their hunting habits in accordance with the availability or scarcity of game. A dual hunting pattern evolved that saw winters spent on the coastal ice in pursuit of sea mammals, and summers spent inland in search of caribou and fresh water fish.



Hunting equipment ranged from whaling and sealing gear, which features harpoons with detachable heads, trident fishspears, powerful composite bows, and delicately carved ivory lures and fish hooks. Household equipment included: stone lamps and pots used for heating and cooking; bowls, plates and drinking vessels carved from wood; and even some pottery (Western Arctic). Many of these items are so useful in the arctic that modern exploring expeditions have found them irreplaceable. We need mention only the well-known sleds and dogteams, snowhouses, kayaks, fur and sealskin boots, skin clothing, and snow goggles to illustrate this point. Particularly impressive are such delicate articles as needles, combs, awls, spoons, and elaborately carved figures, all cut, shaped, and decorated with a rotary bow drill.

Among their limited resources were various stones, native copper and meteorite iron, mosses, lichens, small alpine plants and berries, ivory bone and horn, driftwood and the wood of stunted northern spruce and willow, and the skins of both animals and fish. All of nature was exploited to maintain life.

Soapstone was used to create the lamps and kettles for simmering soups and melting snow for drinking water. Tools were fashioned from caribou antler and the tusks of walrus and narwhal. The horns of the musk ox provided the material for creating spoons and ladles. Slate, flint, and obsidian were the raw materials to work blades for knives, scrapers, lances, and arrow and harpoon heads. Sinew, a fine fibrous 'thread,' came from the spinal tendons of the caribou and large sea mammals. It was braided to make thongs, cords, strings for bows, and was invaluable in the construction of skin clothing. Needles were made from tiny bones or cold-hammered native copper. Baleen, a plastic-like fibre from whales, had the property of shedding ice and did not frost up. It was used for fishing lines and snares.

The tradition of technology within the arctic was passed on from one generation to the next by observing the elders create the means to survive. One learned by watching and doing. Material possessions were limited to those that promoted survival; they were either left behind or carried when travelling and they could always be replaced. Possessions that did not benefit the person, family, or village were not important. The Inuit had a strong bond with and an intimate knowledge of both the land and all living things.

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Guest Curator of "Inuit Hands: Samples of Arctic Survival"

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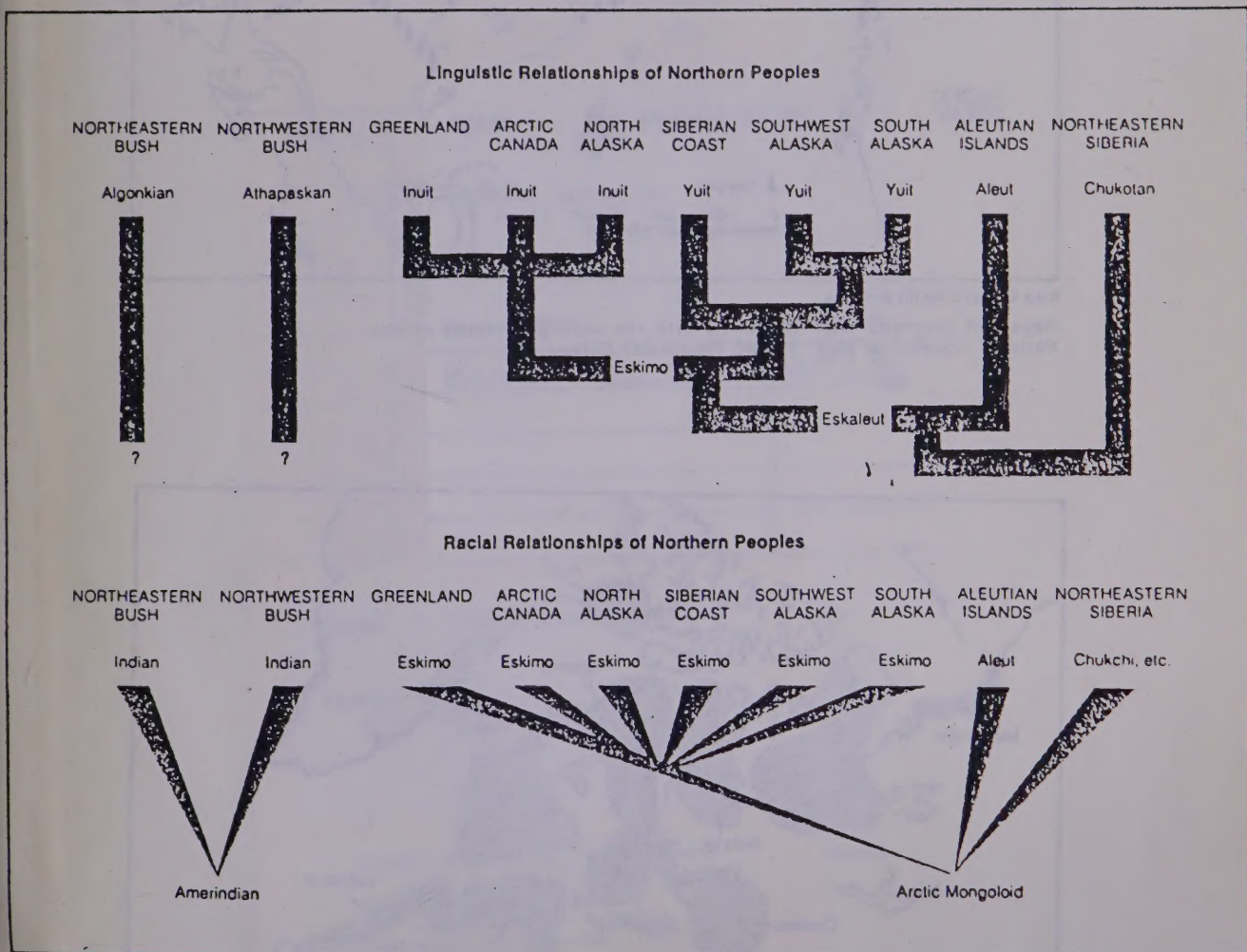
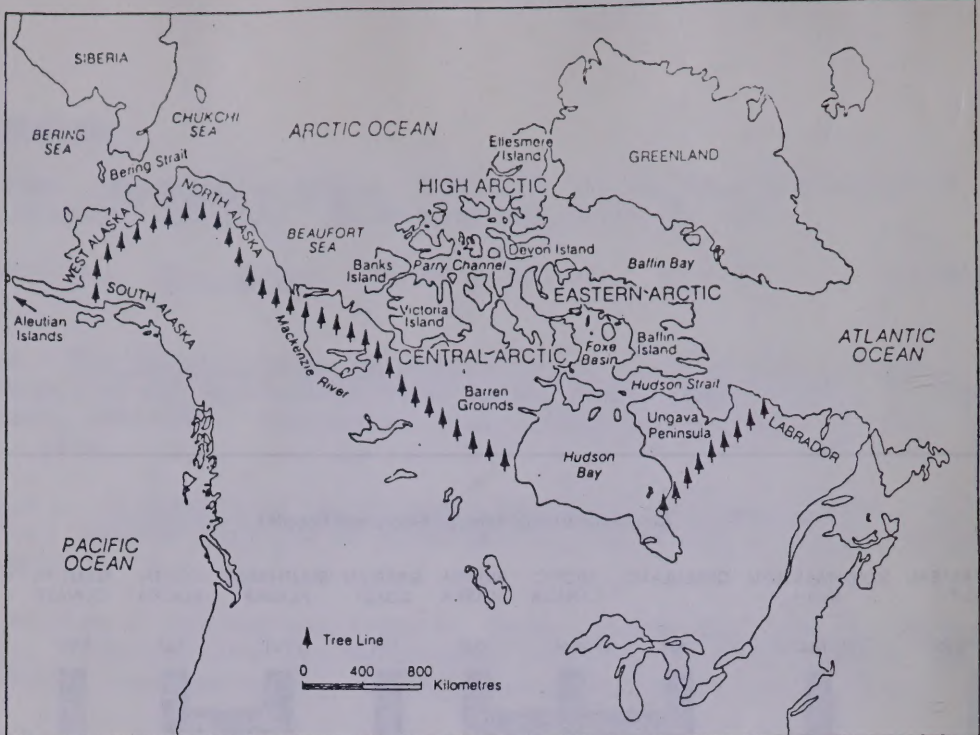


Diagram 1.

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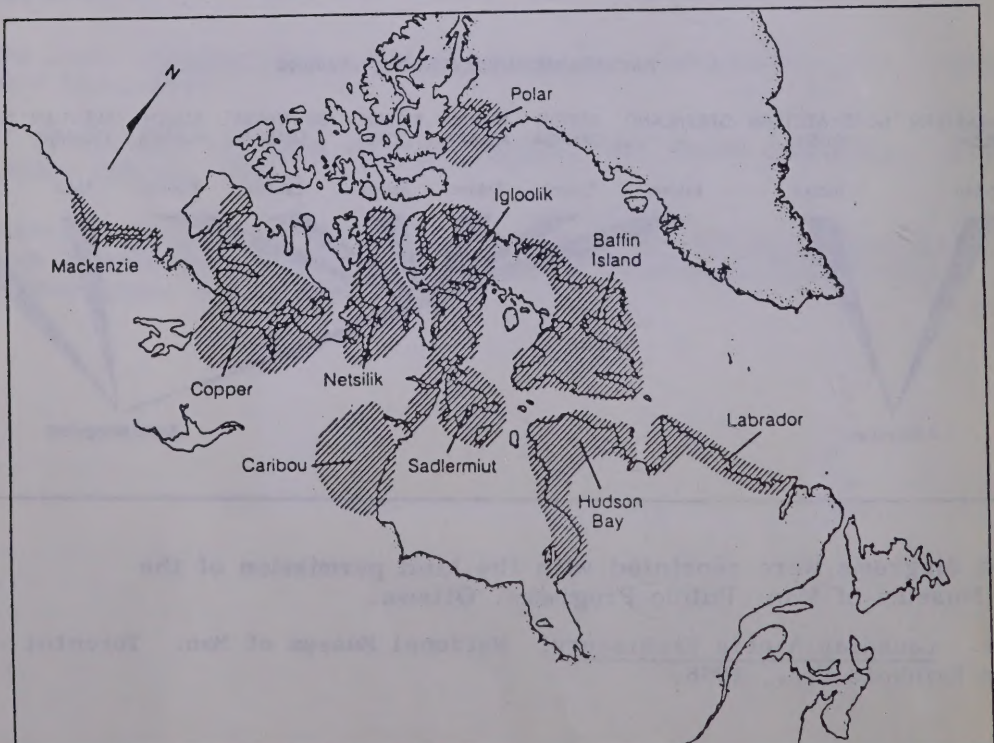
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Map 1. Arctic North America

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Map 7. Historic Inuit Occupations of Arctic Canada

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